

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF S.B. 180
AN ACT CONCERNING PERMANENCY HEARINGS, YOUTH ADVISORY
COUNCILS AND FOSTER FAMILIES
Committee on Children
February 23, 2016

Good afternoon distinguished members of the Committee on Children. Thank you for this opportunity to speak up about advocacy for girls in our youth justice system. I am Kitty Tyrol from the Tow Youth Justice Institute at the University of New Haven.

I have had the privilege to facilitate the Speak Up! Program for the Center for Children's Advocacy at Touchstone and Journey House. Girls were able to address many challenges and concerns about their care in residential settings as well as what led them there and what they knew they needed to address before moving on. Some of the topics explored were their experiences with AWOL (running away from home and placements), how they were treated upon recovery or return and the procedures involved, limited access to their DCF social workers or other adults assigned to their case which were often people with whom they had no relationship, rules and restrictions while in custody that deeply impacted their coping skills and normal behavior like singing and dancing, lack of information or inclusion about placements and permanency plans, and a general sense that the adults charged with their treatment either lacked a true sense of their lived experience or lacked expertise in how to meet their needs, and that they often felt they were being treated like children with little regard for their competencies or capacities to inform decisions made about them. While many of the topics focused on what they felt was wrong or difficult about being involved in the juvenile justice system, they were also able to identify and speak up about what they need, what they want, and what they can do or hope for to move forward to be discharged and be successful.

By providing girls an opportunity to speak up and share their voice, experiences, and concerns about their treatment and needs we, as a system, are better informed and able to be more gender responsive in case planning in their care and treatment. By fostering self-advocacy skills, girls learn pro social and healthy ways to stand up for themselves and others. By listening to girls we foster empathy and build relationships with and among girls that gives them hope in their future. By speaking up today, we continue to model the value and importance of this skill and opportunity during their adolescent development at perhaps a most critical time in their lives when they have been removed from their families and community and feel disempowered, marginalized, and unheard.

From my experience in working with and on behalf of girls in the youth justice system this bill is an opportunity to explicitly support a gender responsive approach in practice at a most vulnerable time for girls. I ask that you support this bill.

1. Adolescent girls involved in their treatment and case planning by attending permanency hearings can be a critical asset to successful permanency plans. Girls need to know what is being shared about them in honest and meaningful ways in order that they become a part of the solution. Girls often feel left out of this most important aspect of their case planning. Including girls empowers them by engaging them in their own planning.

2. Girls living in congregate care often feel that they have reached a certain “end of the line” in their treatment, which results in a sense of powerlessness and invisibility. Giving girls opportunity and skills practice to become their own advocate in their treatment and in the program model can counter this effect by engaging girls and motivating them to reconnect. When girls are disconnected and lack opportunities or choices, they feel they have nothing else to lose. An advisory council that elicits girls’ ideas and fosters critical thinking to address concerns or problems helps develop their decision-making skills for themselves and for others. Ultimately, they become engaged in their programming and residential community and feel they are valued as a stakeholder in the outcomes.
3. One of the girls was so deeply committed to informing her successful transition to a foster family that she suggested that foster family profiles should be provided ahead of time to foster kids before they are moved into a new home. Girls in particular are very observant and curious about potential placement, wanting to know what it looks like, who is in the family or home, what their personal space and shared space looks like, what kinds of things the family does and in particular the culture of the family and how that will allow the girls to connect to build relationships and develop a sense of fitting in or belonging. A simple protocol that gives girls a visual context can make a huge difference in how girls respond to this next step in their case planning. The very idea of providing a profile that can not only ease the anxiety and apprehension, but can give girls hope and motivation to take the next step to return to a community, to step into a home, and to become part of family is brilliant!

By allowing girls to speak up and have a voice in these ways is certainly as brilliant as their ideas and can illuminate the path for other girls who come into the system, leading them to be successful as well. I ask this Committee to support this bill. Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,

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